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B E T W E E N



B E T W E E N

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Aya Takashima

May 2001

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Hajime Ishiyama
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INTRODUCTION

Do we really see anything? We look at everything around us and suppose that we really know what we observe. As my life's work I have embraced an exploration of that aspect of human perception through which I organize and interpret the world-vision.

One's vision is thought to provide reliable information, hence the saying "seeing is believing." Nothing would be sure if one started to suspect the existence of what was perceived and the way it was perceived. It is natural to believe that what one sees is in fact what exists and that it exists as perceived. However, I often find myself questioning the differences and relationships between what I perceive and what I conceive.

This thesis will present the progress of my thoughts, and the process of my art-making from 1997 to 2001. I started as a photographer, yet during this time my main interest has shifted to utilizing space and objects to create illusion. The enchantment of illusion is that it gives the viewer false information by deceiving the senses. As an illusion progresses, questions about perceptual understanding arise. What we know is challenged by what we see, and slowly believing becomes seeing.

The world seems to hide something within what appears to be. If one accepts what appears to be without questioning, then the hidden is never revealed. Questioning myself is far more important than getting an answer.

BACKGROUND

My father always reminds me not to forget that I am Japanese. Since I have been living in the United States for almost five years, he thinks I will forget my heritage. An admonition made more interesting by the fact that one of the reasons my parents named me Aya was to make my name easy enough to be pronounced when I traveled outside of Japan. I had never thought about being Japanese until I came to the United States because everything around me was Japanese. I knew there were different cultures outside of Japan; yet, I did not think that those differences would affect me. To my surprise being in a place in which all I see is not Japanese has heightened my consciousness about being Japanese in spite of my father's concern.

I worked in the field of photography for ten years before entering the masters degree program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Various experiences during those years led me to apply to this program. I studied photography at the Osaka University of Arts in Japan. After graduating from college, I started working for a professional photography lab, assisting commercial photographers and doing freelance photography. Through working in the "real world," I gained experience in the highly commercial aspects of photography; however, I realized that I was more interested in self-fulfillment as an artist. In preparation for entering an M.F.A. program in the United States, I attended the New England School Of Photography in Boston in 1997.

The experience at the New England School Of Photography was very important for me. One of the aspects in my photography that I noticed at that time was that my images always had a sense of simplicity, calmness and meditative

quality. My teachers and classmates at the school, also, acknowledged that my photographs had a certain quality which they defined as "Japanese." I understood their acknowledgement as a notion of me as being Japanese and thus making inherently Japanese images. It was a heightened awareness of how I perceived my surroundings which made me think more about who I was and from where my work and ideas had come.

THE MIRROR

I take photographs of myself from time to time in order to see myself. It is important for me to really look at myself in a photograph; to examine it, analyze who I am and determine where I am. However, the question for me was, if I could never really see myself, how could I know what I know about my corporeal self?



fig. 1

One day in Boston, I was looking at my face in a mirror preparing to make a self-portrait and suddenly realized that I had never seen my face. I knew that since my eyes are part of my face, I would never see my face. This was a surprising revelation in spite of the fact that I knew the mirror reflects what is in front of it. What

I thought of as my face was a mirrored image, a two dimensional, full size, reversed representation and not my actual face at all. This realization made me wonder what I had seen and how I had seen up to that moment in my life. I have seen unmirrored versions of my face in photographs or video, but they too, are representations. Mirrored images and photographs are similar in that they seem perfect copies. As Oliver Wendell Holmes called Daguerreotypes "the mirror with a memory¹," they seem so accurate that often people accept them and do not question the nature of what is photographed.

In Boston, I started my project questioning reality through the use of mirrors. Looking at a mirror and the reflections in it made me feel as if there was another world within that mirror and there was only a very loose boundary between the

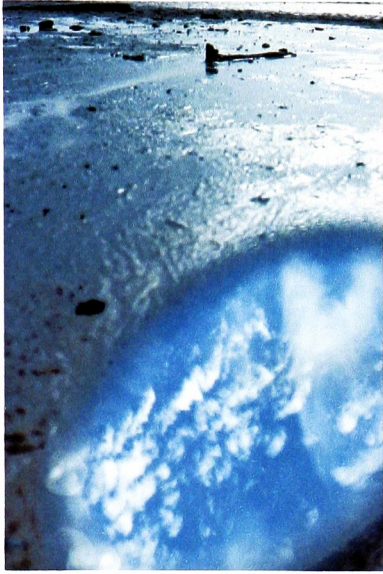


fig. 2

“inside” and the “outside.” This deceptive quality that mirrors create led me to the question, how can one know that the world perceived as occupied is the “real” one? Extending this project, I incorporated window frames and picture frames in addition to the mirrors. Framing separates a scene from its surroundings, and creates a world within it. To me, mirrors question reality and windows and/or frames create a separation from

the world, contradicting John Szarkowski’s² definition of mirrors as reflections of one’s inner-scape and windows as openings to the real world.



fig. 3

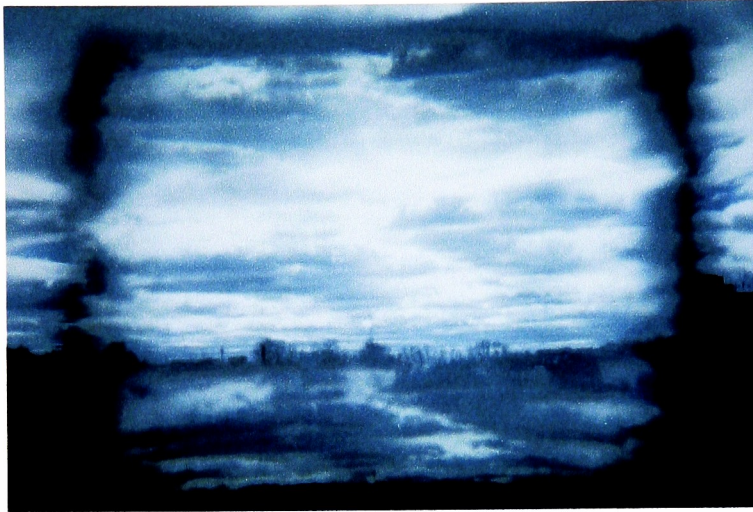


fig. 4

Around the same time I was introduced to Duane Michals' work. I was fascinated with the playful, humorous way he told stories with photography. Most important, he challenged viewers to consider another dimension to the world, which interested me. For example, in *THINGS ARE QUEER*³, Michals plays with frames and



fig. 5

scale. In the first of the nine photographs in the sequence are a bathtub, a sink and a toilet in what appears to be an ordinary bathroom. However, in the next photograph, a gigantic leg suddenly appears into the frame. One realizes that those things in the bathroom were miniatures. In every photograph, Michals shows new surprises and opens up another dimension which influences how the next photograph in the sequence is known. In the end, the photographs return to where they started as if none of the story that Michals presented had ever been shown.

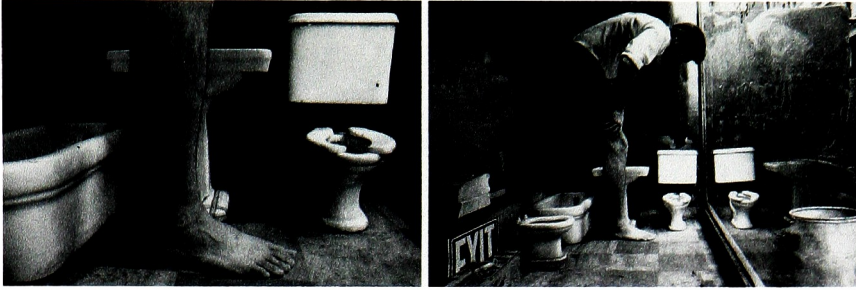


fig. 6

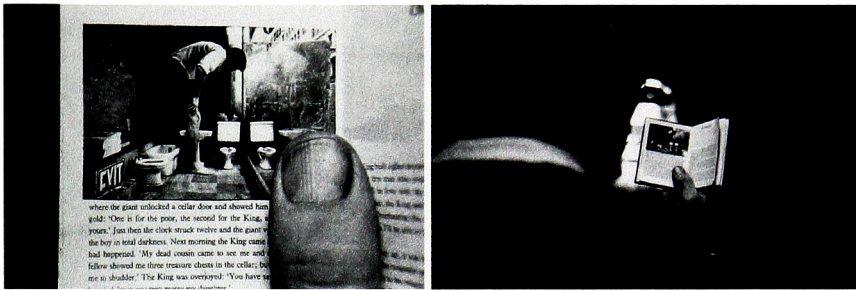


fig. 7

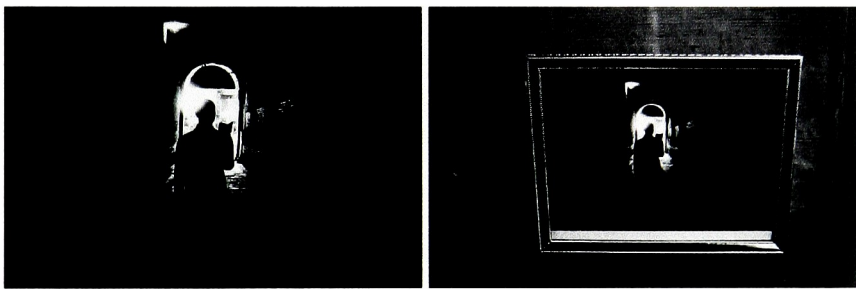


fig. 8

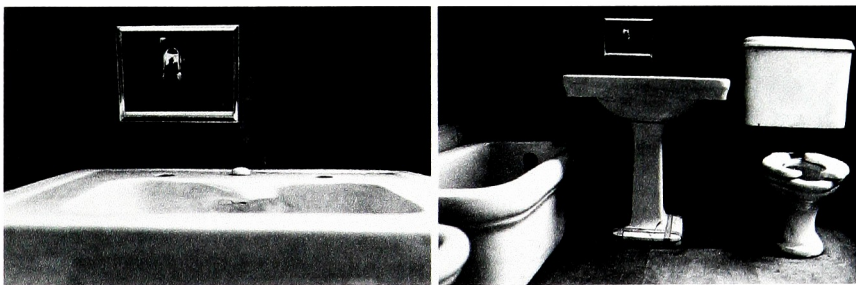


fig. 9

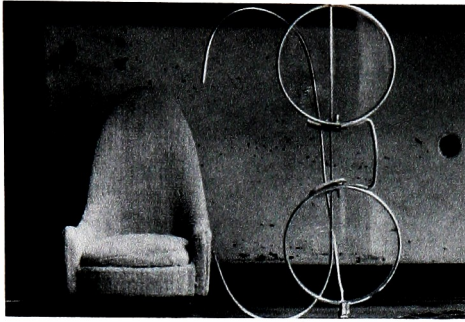


fig. 10

In *ALICE'S MIRROR*⁴, Michals plays with mirrors as well as frames and scale. Through the images in *ALICE'S MIRROR*, what seemed real turns out to be a mirrored image of reality inside the

mirror. The use of mirrors and frames in Michals' work made me think about how one's vision works. One either consciously or unconsciously selects what to see. To me, his work seemed an intensified version of how one sees.

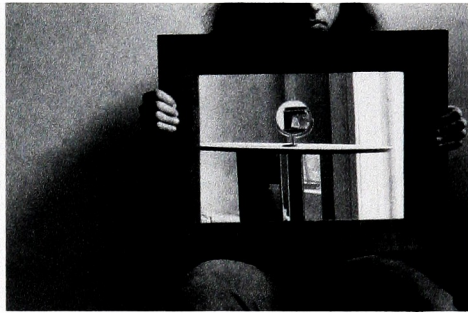
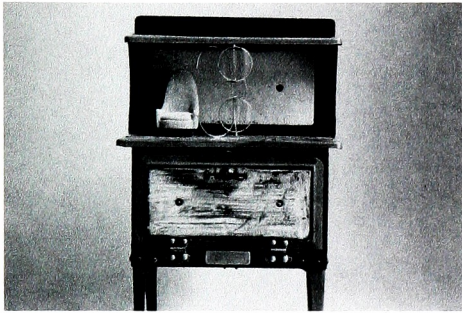


fig. 11

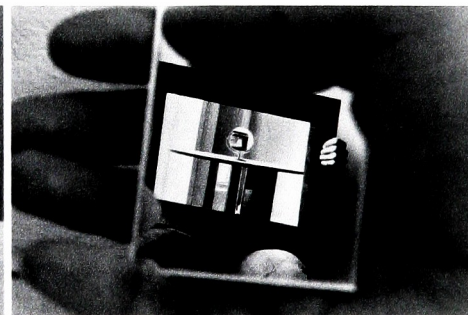
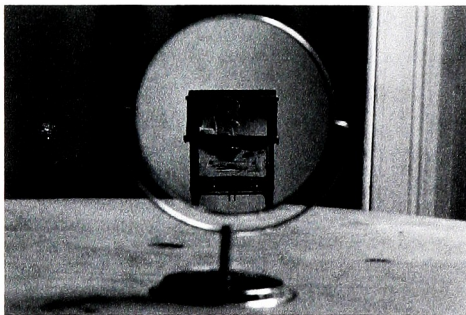


fig. 12

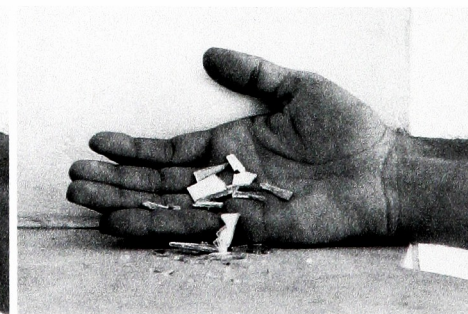
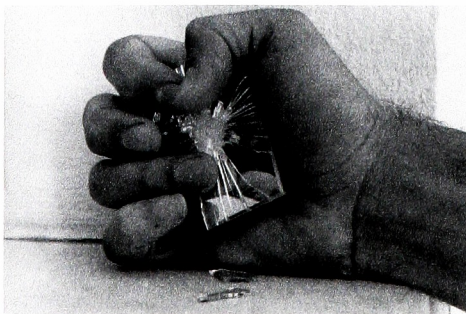


fig. 13

Michals' photographs made me think more about the relationship between fiction and reality. His writing underscored my questions.

A FAILED ATTEMPT TO PHOTOGRAPH REALITY⁵

*How foolish of me to believe that it would be that easy.
I had confused the appearances of trees and automobiles,
and people with reality itself, and believed that
a photograph of these appearances to be a photograph
of it. It is a melancholy truth that I will
never be able to photograph it and can only fail.
I am a reflection photographing other reflections
within a reflection. To photograph reality
is to photograph nothing.*

As I worked with mirrors, there came a point when it seemed it was actually the mirror that was making my imagery. I made formal, compositional decisions and took the pictures but I was overwhelmed by the fact that mirrors always reflect objects as perfect copies. Instead of using the mirror, I felt as if I was being used by it. The techniques made possible by the use of a mirror became the work and I felt I was merely tricking viewers with my images. I was not truly experiencing what was in front of a lens, rather I was just trying to make images up. The February 6th entry in my journal is the clearest statement of my thoughts at the time.

I am lost now. I need to start all over again. I have been thinking how I got here and how I got lost. I found that by using mirrors, what the mirror does became dominant to my mind. The mirror is now what makes the image, and not me. I realized otherwise that the mirror should be just a way and a tool, which supposed to be a help to my images.

I wanted to create an illusive quality in my pictures. I have been thinking why I am stuck with this idea of illusive quality. When thinking about illusiveness, I would think of my existence, why and how I happen to be here in this world. It is amazing that I really exist. It fascinates me that my DNA carries the memory of which my blood inherited from the beginning of this world. Am I going too far?

After a two month hiatus from making pictures, I began again by taking snapshots. I shot whatever I saw around me and tried to be conscious about perceiving my surroundings. The process was completely intuitive, I did not compose, and there was no hesitation to release the shutter whether or not I thought a scene would make a good image. This attitude towards photography is what I learned from the work of the Japanese photographer, Nobuyoshi Araki.



fig. 14

Nobuyoshi Araki has been an influential figure since I first saw his book, *Kukei/Kinkei* (*Skyscape/Close-range*⁶), which was published just after his wife, Yoko, died. Maybe it was my sentiment that was moved the most because

the images in the book and the first line, "After my wife's death, I took pictures of the sky from my room," were filled with his pain and the emptiness without Yoko.

In the book, *Sentimental Journey*⁷, along with photographs from his honeymoon, he announced: *I cannot stand it anymore . . . There are false pictures everywhere. False faces, false nudes, false snapshots, and false senses in photographs. This "Sentimental Journey" is not false like those false pictures in the public. This is my love and my determination to be a photographer. . . .* The photographs in the book look like a document of his honeymoon and look real. However, through his other work, I realized through his use of both photographs and text that he plays with the borderline between fiction and reality. Fiction and reality merge into one which challenges the viewers to question a photographic reality. In other words, a photograph is always false because it is just a copy of reality, and it is always real because his action of taking pictures coupled with the feeling he has towards his subject and the experience are captured.

For Araki, photography is about instinct not plans or intentions. His philosophy is where I always come back to refresh myself. His comment about the work made around Yoko's death was real. He stated,

Death is a true reality. I cannot say death can be fiction. I had to take pictures of her death to really see myself and to complete my love to Yoko. I thought it was not right to ask viewers for grief by showing this work. Deep down, I wanted to show life through my pictures after Yoko's death. But every time I clicked the shutter, I was getting close to death. I did not intend to express my grief when I took those pictures. That kind of things comes unconsciously. By looking at those pictures afterwards, I could deeply understand my grief and I had to take pictures to find the answer⁸.



fig. 15



fig. 16



fig. 17

EXAMINATION

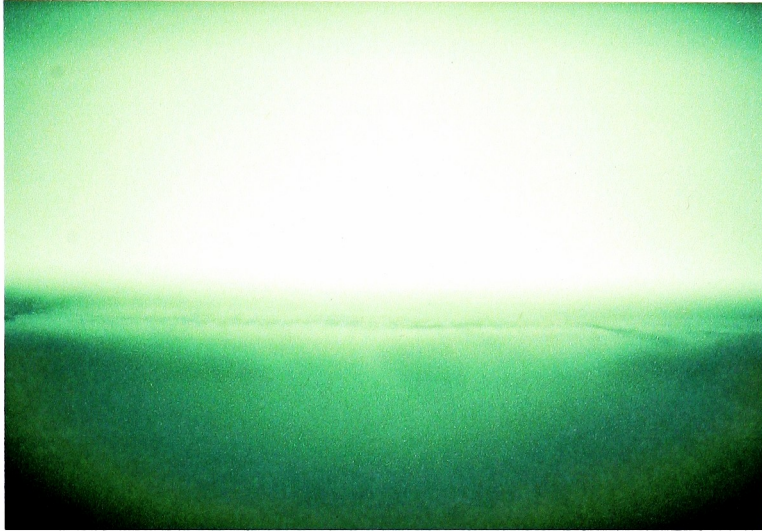


fig. 18

Shortly thereafter, I started to make a series of photographs which were different from anything I had photographed previously. Rather than recordings of what was in front of a lens, they were abstract and had a sense of light, depth and tactility. Believing I should not be too conscious about what I was trying to do, I did not want to translate my photographs to words. Intuitiveness, honesty to myself, and faith in my eye were still the important factors for making photographs. I allowed myself to flow with my new work and to experience this new way of seeing. I described this process as:

A reason can be destroyed by another reason.

An explanation can be just a play of words.

However, feelings along an experience remain.

Do I need to justify myself to others?

I always want something very sure to myself.

February 10th, 1998

It was wintertime. I remember it was very cold and I did not want to go out. I began to observe everything in my one bedroom apartment in Boston. I set up neither objects nor lights to take pictures. Rather, with my camera in my hand, I walked around in my apartment day and night, sometimes laying on a floor or standing on a desk or a kitchen counter discovering many things in my everyday life which had previously gone unattended. By the end of this project, I knew every detail such as light coming in certain times of the day casting interesting shapes of shadows, the delicate pale shadows cast by uneven walls, the shape of stains on the ceiling and floor, or the wrinkles of the sofa cover.

I had a formula when making this series of photographs. At first, I found an object that interested me and examined it and its surroundings. Then with my camera in front of my eye, I took a closer look. This time I would slowly change the focus plane of the lens or move myself toward or away from the object. The lens allowed me to see things in a completely different way than I had with bare eyes. My desk became an ocean with the horizon, a curtain became waves and the sofa became desert. As a result, the photographs became the absence of what was photographed (*it was there*), which now emphasizing the presence of the absence (*was it there?*). I knew these photographs would lead me in a new direction and I trusted the process to lead my vision.

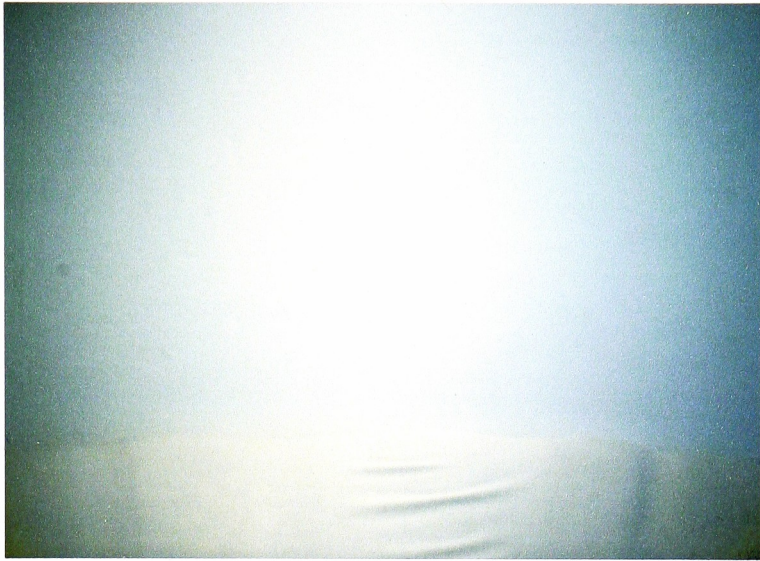


fig. 19



fig. 20



fig. 21

At the same time I began to define art for myself. I had thought of art as purely self-expression. Now I questioned if art could only be about self-expression.

Photographs that I take and myself are always connected. Yet, I wonder if my photographs are about who I am. I would immediately said yes to this question before because my photographs were, I thought, about my self-expression. I wonder if my photographs are the reflection of myself or reflection of the world. Perhaps both. I have been realizing that my interest is not on putting my words and my thoughts on other people or showing off myself to others. I just want to make something I have never seen and something I have never experienced.

Feb. 20th, 1998

I had ideas about my photography. However, I needed experience in solving visual problems and developing a more critical eye. It was important for me to improve these skills because I knew I wanted to work in the field of photography as an artist. Graduate school seemed an option that would give me opportunities to both create more work and develop the ideas behind it. In addition, an M.F.A. would enable me to teach photography so that I would be able to share my experience.

**RIT / FIRST YEAR / FIRST QUARTER WORK /
INNERSCAPE – THE DREAM OF AN UNBORN BABY
OR GENETIC MEMORY**

In August 1998, I came to the Rochester Institute of Technology to start my graduate study. The first quarter at RIT was the hardest one for me. Adjusting to a new environment always takes a lot of effort, in addition, I was not sure which direction I wanted my work to take.

I was thinking about continuing to explore the abstract photographs that I made before I came to RIT. However, in the very first class, the professor challenged me to start a new project. As always I started by making self-portraits to determine where I was going.

What is this unexplainable feelings?

It is similar to the feeling of fear, but not quite.

*Something so elemental that I can't even think of any way
to articulate it. It is almost like the memory inherited
through my blood is telling me something. It is just a
feeling, yet it is somehow very physical and very real.*

Sep. 26th, 1999.

*Our genetic memory contains all memory of the
evolution of human beings. This interests me very much.
I came from my mother's womb. While I was in her womb,
I must have experienced the evolution which human*

beings came through, by being one cell to two cells, four cells to eight cells and so on to became a human being. This is what I and all human beings went through, but we are not remembering anything about it. I believe, however, that the memory of being in a womb and experiencing the evolution must be somewhere in an unconscious level of our mind.

Oct. 2nd. 1999.

I tried to articulate this idea of genetic memory by making abstract photographs and combining them with self-portraits. Since I assumed unborn babies did not see, I thought abstract imagery would represent their visual experience. I tried to make images which contained no language or readable signs. An unborn baby's world, I assumed, must be dominated by physical senses rather than intellectual ones. Self-portraits were included to identify this project as a search for my origin.

For the final review of the quarter, I presented six 40" x 60" black and white self-portraits, posed as if I was in a womb, hung from the ceiling. I used infrared film for the self-portraits to create the surrealistic quality of me being in a womb. In front of each self-portrait were a number of abstract images hung to create DNA patterns. Since the abstract images were transparent, viewers could see the self-portraits through them.

In my artist statement, I wrote,

"An unborn baby is having an unimaginable dream while growing in a womb. The dream is about the evolution of life, which starts from long before a human being was formed. The dream contains not only a physical side of evolution, but also a mental and emotional side of evolution which includes all kinds of the struggle for existence and survival. An unborn baby is actually experiencing the whole evolution of life in his/her mother's womb."

By Hisasaku Yumeno⁹

Once I was in my mother's womb, experiencing the whole evolution of life. This is where I came from. Now I am no longer in her womb. My memory of being in her womb and about the dream has been gone. In a way, I lost my memory which keeps myself to identify who I am. Of course, I remember my name, my gender, my career, my age, my nationality, my education, my experiences, etc. though I wonder if those obvious and visible facts can really tell who I am. Those facts separate me from others but still does not tell enough about who I am.

In the final critique, viewers were interested in the idea of genetic memory and they liked the presentation. However, one group of professors pointed out that they did not understand what I was trying to do. This, I thought, should be the response to the work because in the end, I did not know if I was really interested in making this work.

Reflecting back on the quarter, I realized I had changed my normal process at the beginning of the quarter. My art starts from experiencing what is around me but in this quarter, a concept was the starting point of my work. This process absolutely did not work for me.

SECOND QUARTER WORK / COLORSCAPE

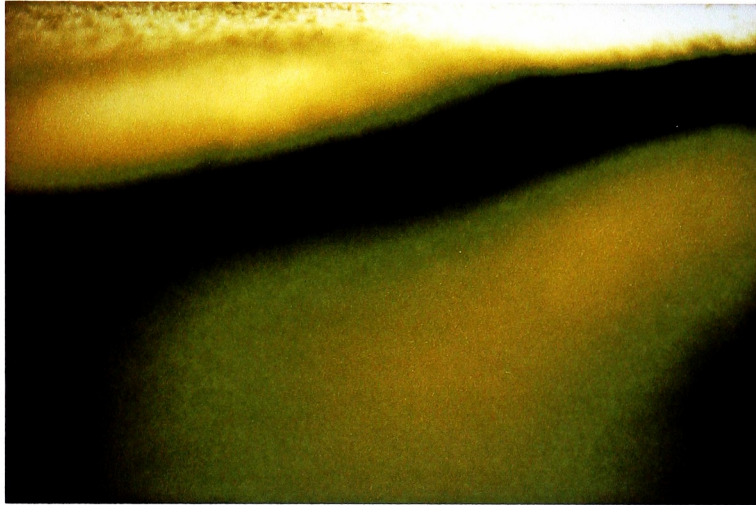


fig. 22

In the second quarter, I returned to earlier ideas to re-examine how my thoughts might be realized. The first abstract photographs were the discovery of a new way of seeing. The close examination of an object, the light falling on the object, its cast shadow, and the surroundings were important factors. Through photographs of unrecognizable objects, viewers thought of the original objects that might have been photographed, as well as perceiving images of something unseen. The process of seeing and examining an object was the key to the previous work and was the starting place for my new project. Over time, the images became more colorful and more abstract. Most of them did not have a plane of focus and they became more like paintings.

I am not trying to present what is visible. What is this invisible thing that I want to present then? Is this something I can see when my eyes are closed? Is it memory or some sorts? Between unconsciousness and consciousness? Unreality in reality? Something that is fuzzy and uneasy? What is this something? Something like that appears and disappears time to time in my consciousness and memory.

I have been trying to understand why my photographs became so abstract. I could say, it is the world that I am perceiving through a lens, it is about feelings that I get from what is around me, I am trying to capture something that I cannot explain with words, I am just trying to be intuitive, I am looking inside of myself in the different way from which I normally see things outside me, I am making these abstract color photographs because I just like how they look, or I am abstracting the world around me because I do not want to see reality and cannot stand look-like-real presentations that photography has as its nature, and so on. I can keep writing these forever. These explanations are not made up. They are true in a sense but they are not what my work is about.

February 3rd, 1999.



fig. 23

The inability to explain my work actually explained my work. I unconsciously excluded visual clues or language, which would have had particular meanings to allow the viewer to create an inner language. I wanted my work to be felt instead of read intellectually. I used 35mm transparency film, cross processed it, and enlarged the slides to 30" x 48" prints in order to maximize the grain. The large size prints created and emphasized their physicality, forcing the viewer to perceive emotionally instead of intellectually.

In my artist statement I wrote,

I want to see something invisible, and I want to feel something untouchable, like mind, time, air, sound, smell, and temperature, but not necessarily something spiritual. If I did not have my eyes, I would still try to see. I really want to see something that I cannot see with my eyes.

Abstract photography and paintings are often associated with aspects of spirituality. Because there is no recognizable object in abstract photography, it is easy to think that the work is not about a representational world, but rather a spiritual one.

This work, however, is not about spirituality. It is, instead, about color, granularity and emptiness. The color gives temperature to the images. Close up, the images are filled with granularity. From a distance, however, granularity disappears and the images become full of emptiness.

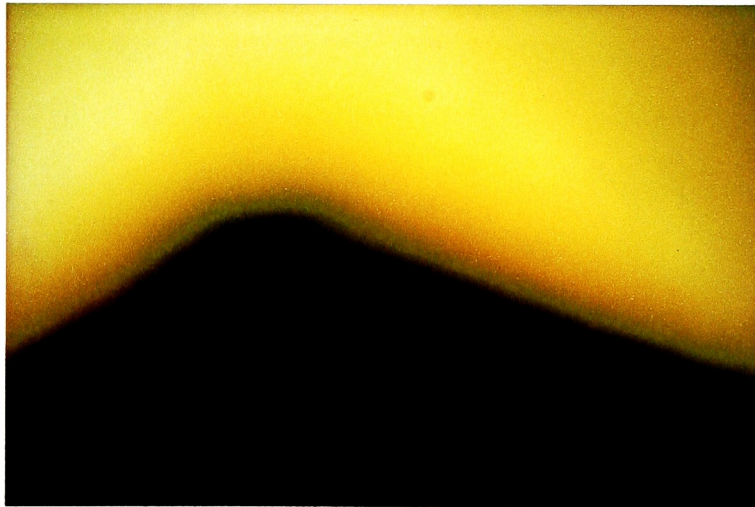


fig. 24

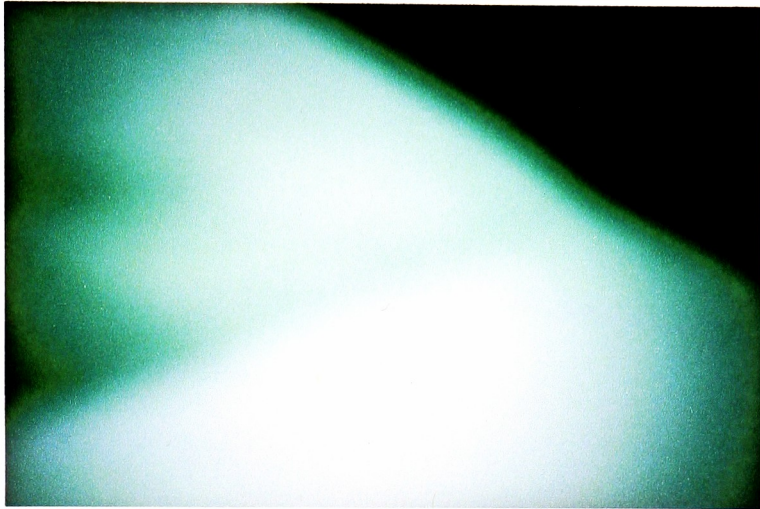


fig. 25

The invisible and untouchable are important even if they cannot be perceived. If there were no silences or intervals, then music would not exist. My mother is a music therapist and I helped her in her work with patients by creating improvisations on the piano. For example, I played the piano for a group of people who had emotional difficulties either at school or at work because they could not express themselves naturally. At the therapy session, each client chose one instrument, such as a drum, a tambourine, or a xylophone. What I did was listen to their sounds including the silences and played the piano with them as if we were having a conversation with music. Most important, I tried not to use my logic, but rather I used intelligence and intuition; I tried to sense the air around us, more as I imagine a wild animal senses its surroundings. It was through this experience of creating a musical language to unlock the reality of histories, that I began to formulate my idea about the invisible and the untouchable.

In this second quarter work, viewers almost always wanted to know what I had photographed. The same thing happened when I made the first generation of abstract photographs, but at that time the question seemed a natural response. This time the question really bothered me. It is quite natural that viewers would ask this

question because of the media that I was using. Unlike painting and music, photography generally implies an object in front of a camera in order to be completed. Since my work did not show the idea of invisible to the viewers they struggled to figure out what was photographed. In addition to my idea of invisibility, a new question arose; how could I make a photograph that did not represent anything, but would be seen as a manifestation of the essence of photography itself?

THIRD QUARTER WORK FIVE WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS, THE WRINKLED FABRIC



fig. 26

In one of the very first classes in the third quarter, I had an interesting critique from the class and the professor. I showed some work prints and two 30" x 48" prints, which were an extension of my second quarter work. They started to tell me how beautiful my photographs were. A professor told me that I was ready to graduate now because I could make such pretty photographs. I realized that they were trying to tell me my work was "too" beautiful, but there was nothing more within it. This hit me hard and made me re-examine everything I had done previously. Aesthetic quality is obviously an important aspect of an image. However, my core concern had been to make images that utilized the essence of photography, not to make photographs that were just pretty.

At that time, in addition to the question of making a non representational photograph manifesting the essence of photography itself, I questioned the possibility of meaningful beauty.

Again, being too real is a problem in photography. Photography is believed as representation of something. People get confused with what a photograph is of and the photograph itself. A photograph as a photograph, and not the representation of something else is what I want my photographs to be. My photographs are not of something. I am eliminating clues and hints of what a photograph is of in order to show a photograph itself. When an image disappears from a photograph, it becomes a photograph itself. It is no longer the representation of something. It is what it is.

April 19th, 1999

Through a process of subtracting what was unnecessary to the images, they gradually became quieter in terms of color, line and movement. Showing just enough, was what I thought of as an approach to the answer. Through simplification, the photograph would become elemental rather than a representational.

The idea of invisibility arose again as my photographs became seemingly empty. Even though the image is minimized, a photograph itself exists as an object or a piece of paper. It seemed that there was no way to get rid of its substantiality.

Invisible and visible just seem opposite but I think they are contained within each other. Maybe invisible is in a visible thing. In order to see "invisible", visible has to be presented because one cannot see invisible things. Only one can see the invisible through visible. This is what illusion and imagination is about. There is a difference between seeing what is not there and seeing what one does not know what s/he is looking at.

April 26, 1999

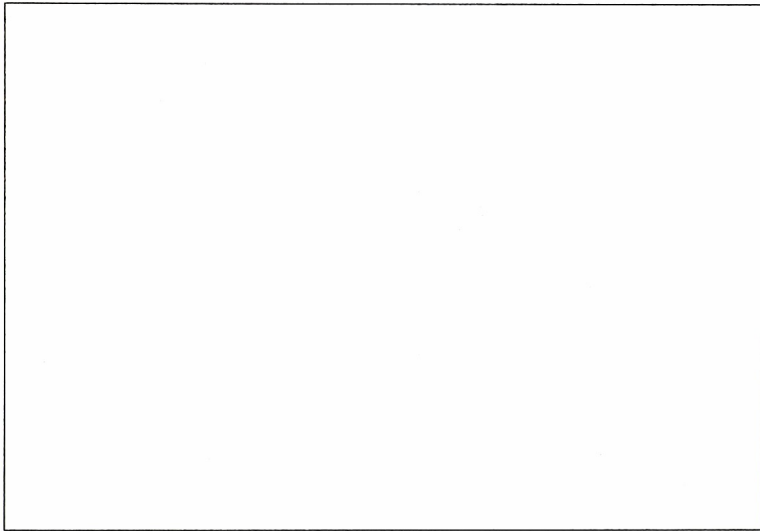


fig. 27

Finally, my photographs became almost white and at first glance, looked empty. The subtleties would appear after long and thoughtful observation. However, sight was contradicted as the imagery began to emerge, and the viewer wondered if there was really something in the white photographs or if the brain was filling a white space with an image.



fig. 28

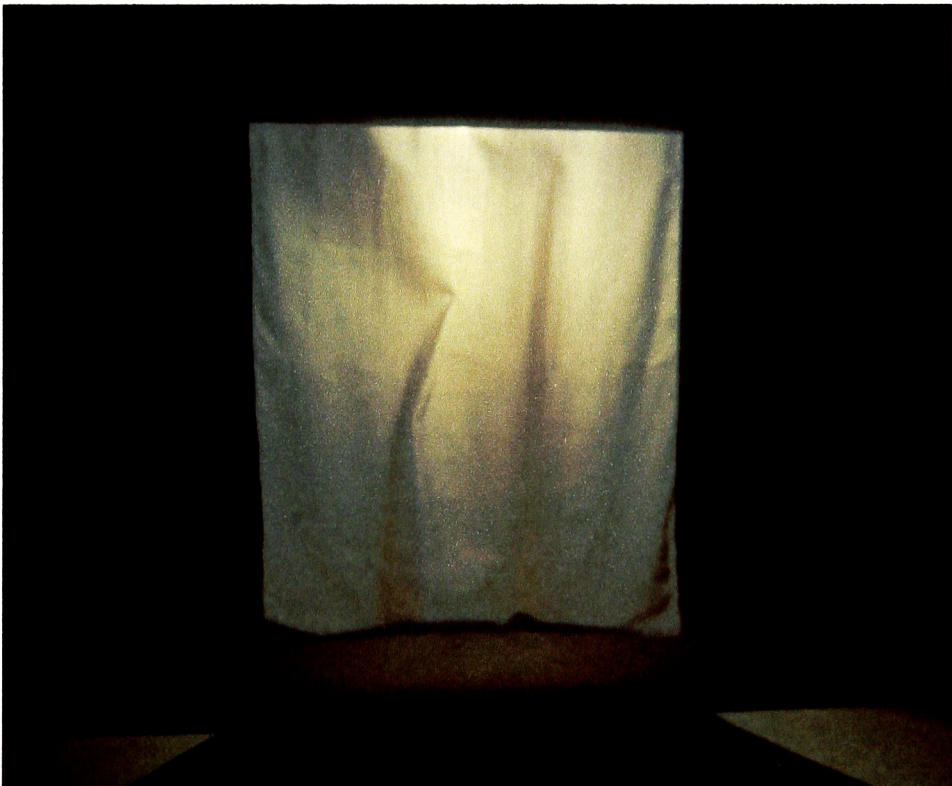
One of my favorite books from my childhood talks about something similar. The title of the book is *Tooru ga tooru*¹⁰, which means Tooru (the boy's name) Passes By. There are several stories in the book but I only remember one of them. The story starts with Tooru asking his mother for a piece of big white

paper. She thinks he is going to draw or paint a picture on it. After a while she goes to Tooru's room and finds him looking at the big blank white paper hung on the wall in front of him. She asks him what he is doing and Tooru tells his mother that he is looking at pictures of the sky, mountains, the sun and many others, on the blank white paper. This story is about imagination. As a child I probably liked the story because I used to do similar things. After 25 years, I again started to do something similar, but this time with a little more information.

The invisible contained within the visible as illusion led me to create an installation to show with the *Five White Photographs*. The more I thought about the invisible, the more the idea of illusion seemed to play an important role. Takeshi Yoro, a Japanese anatomist, says in his book *The Cerebralism*¹¹ that the brain is an organ for knowing. Therefore, only the information already in the brain can be recognized. For example, if the information about "A" is not in the brain, then the idea about "A" does not exist. "Invisible" is something that cannot be seen. Therefore, the brain does not

conceive of the invisible as visual information. Illusion is either something received as misinformation or something that cannot be understood with known facts. Perhaps, the brain does not process the information properly, or the brain does process the information properly but there is a gap between the information received and the information already existing in the brain. It is in that gap that illusion exists. I began to imagine that what one sees is what is already in their brain and seeing something is actually seeing oneself; memory and experience are stored in their brain.

I took a photograph of a wrinkled curtain in my apartment. Then I projected that photograph on a large piece of fabric suspending a darkened corner of the studio. I illuminated the fabric from behind so there would be no obvious clue that the fabric was altered by a projected image. The fabric appeared to be wrinkled; however, only when the viewer walked close to it, did the fact that fabric itself was flat and the wrinkles were an illusion become apparent.



In my artist statement for this quarter I wrote,

Seeing is believing; is it really?

Seeing is no longer believing.

Then why do we still keep seeing?

Is it because we have eyes?

No, we still see things when our eyes are closed.

Perhaps, what we are seeing is all illusion.

Everything may be imaginary, created in our brain.

Five White Photographs

*White is the most neutral and the cleanest color that I
can find. White seems not to belong to any color, yet it
contains every color of light. It appears to be nothing and
empty, however, it actually contains all.*

Wrinkled Fabric

*I wanted to see something invisible, and I wanted to feel
something untouchable, like mind, time, air, sound, smell, and
temperature. I have been realizing, however, that there is nothing
that can be called invisible. The human eye can only see what is
visible to it. It is the brain that creates something invisible
through a visible thing.*

Both *Five White Photographs* and *Wrinkled Fabric* question how we know what we see. The experience of making both two and three dimensional work forced me to consider the differences between the two. I used photography as a medium for the two dimensional work because there is an inherent dualism in photography which effects the interpretation. The first experience of an image is when it is recorded on the film, this is my interpretation. The viewers have a second generation experience of seeing when they are asked to decipher the seeming reality presented in the picture in front of them. Thus, two dimensional images tend to be read intellectually instead of being experienced physically, particularly in the case of photography, where an image has already been interpreted by the artist before it is experienced by the viewer. An installation is a real time occurrence for the viewers and a first hand experience of its space and time. It is this direct physical experience which I want to create.

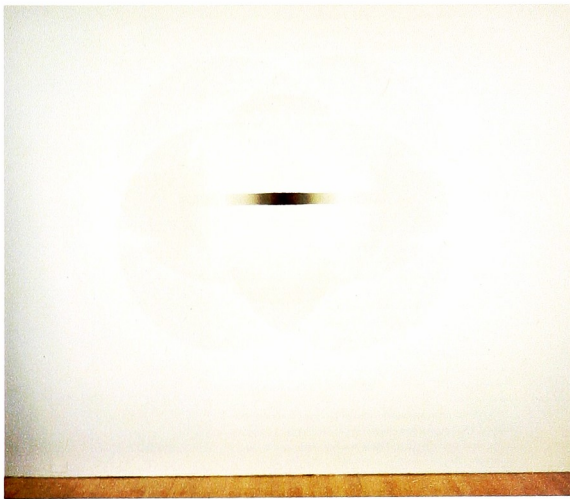


fig. 30

Robert Irwin, the installation artist, states "To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all. What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception¹²." His philosophy and his work fascinated me and helped me

understand my growing awareness. His earlier concerns and approaches to his concerns were what I was struggling with in my abstract photographs. In late 50s', he started to recognize that the gestures he made with paint were always read as

imagery, not experienced as painting itself. Irwin comments on this that "I began to recognize the difference between imagery and physicality, and furthermore that for me, the moment a painting took on any kind of image, the minute I could recognize it as having any relationship to nature, of any kind, to me the painting went flat. Now, I don't know where I got this idea, but there it was. Imagery for me constituted representation, 're-presentation', a second order of reality, where as I was after a first order of presence¹³."



fig. 31

SECOND YEAR / PRE-THESIS

After the third quarter I went back to Japan for about two months. During my stay I thought about my thesis, realizing that I was satisfied by the third quarter exhibition and felt my exploration of those ideas was complete. I trusted my process, knowing that inspiration usually comes to me from working intuitively and through the combination of the art making and experience with life. Once I give myself over to my process I start to form new ideas. Still, inspirations only come when my mind is clear and free, and at the time my mind was filled with fear and anxiety.

Whenever I finish a work with which I am very happy, I have a very difficult time beginning a new project. I have always feared that I would not be able to make work that went beyond what I made previously. It is as if I am squeezing the last bit of toothpaste out of the tube every time I make work and there is nothing left afterward. I wish I could buy another tube but my toothpaste is one of a kind and is unfortunately irreplaceable. This time I hoped to refill it by going out to see what was out there in Japan.

At first, I went to galleries and museums such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the National Museum of Modern Art but nothing really moved me. Instead, it was a small thing, the fireworks that I saw at a summer festival, that fascinated me the most. The display included about 13,000 fireworks at a seaside and lasted for an hour. Sitting with friends on the roof of a building, I watched the fireworks rise, explode and fade away one after another in the dark sky. The experience was not only visual. The sound of the fireworks, which would come after the fireworks exploded depending on their

distance to us, and the smell of powder filled the vibrating atmosphere around us. I was fascinated by the fact that although each individual firework lasted only few seconds, each had a strong individual presence. This ephemeral, yet, overwhelmingly definite presence moved me.

Life is ephemeral and its moments are never repeated. However, because of its ephemerality, the moments become distinct, and the separation between them becomes eternity. The same thing applies to photography. A moment, not an object, captured by a camera becomes distinct, and is eternally fixed as an image. It is time, instead of the physicality of an object that gives one a sense of presence. For me photography is about time, not subject matter.

The first task of my second year was to write a proposal for my thesis. As I reviewed what I had accomplished, I began to clarify the investigation I would undertake. My concern, which began with how a photograph can be perceptually experienced instead of intellectually read, had evolved into how one sees what one sees. Later, questions about visibility and substantiality emerged; if there was nothing to see, what would still be possible to see, and was the invisible the result of the brain perceiving a “reality” that the eye could not capture?

In the practical component of my thesis, I decided to create a space, designed to make the viewer conscious of being in a space. It was the physical experience of a space, instead of the presentation of a two dimensional representation of an intellectually understood space which was critical. By forcing viewers to be self-conscious about their sense of seeing, their seeing would become more innocent. Within the fabricated space I intended an installation utilizing optical illusion which questioned the fact of seeing, combined with photographic imagery which would

explore the relationship of the visible to the invisible. My task would be visualizing the concept of the invisible without contradicting its nothingness. As soon as the invisible is imaged, the invisible has become visible. How then can a visual artist explore the nature of seeing through an exploration of its opposite, the invisible? This constant questioning was what I wanted the viewers to have through my work. I had a semi formed idea of what I was going to do for my thesis but I did not want to repeat the illusion of the third quarter. I was determined to use the ideas of the wrinkled fabric piece as only a starting point.



fig. 32

I began by making 3D models using auto•des•sys's "form•Z", a 3D synthesizer software. Using a computer to make work was not new to me. I had made collages and manipulated images with a computer, yet the

experience, like that of a painter in front of a blank canvas, was totally new. Starting something new excited me and I felt like a child playing with a new toy. I made models of houses and gallery spaces, none of which were over finished, and played with the lighting and texturing options available in the program. As I acquired more skill with the software, I began to make a model of an umbrella.

In order to be able to make a model of an object, the object has to be examined thoroughly. I had an umbrella, which I believe was a rather generic one, next to my computer as I carefully imitated its shape. I decided to make an umbrella because of its interesting shape and because it is a very familiar object which has been given

extraordinary qualities. This common object used to protect one from rain is imagined as a fantastic object with which one can fly. Having such opposite qualities within one object interests me. Opposite qualities such as invisibleness and visibleness, illusion and reality, absence and presence, and false and truth are almost always contained within each other and cannot be separated without destroying both. Between seeming opposites lies the point where they merge and become one. That is where, I believe, one perceives the invisible.

The Surrealist painter, Rene Magritte stated that “what one sees in an object is another, hidden, object¹⁴.” Magritte used familiar objects in his paintings to

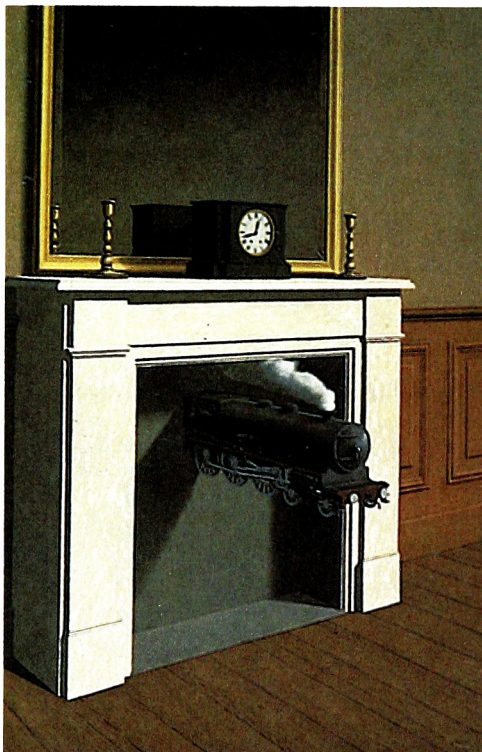


fig. 33

communicate surrealistic ideas. The relationship among the familiar objects in his paintings is so mysterious and imaginative that each of those familiar objects begins to have extraordinary qualities. Particularly relevant to my work is Magritte's notion of familiar objects evoking mysterious qualities as expressed in his comment on his painting, *Time Transfixed*.

..., I decided to paint the image of a locomotive. Starting from the possibility, the problem presented itself as follows: how to paint this image so that it would evoke mystery – that is, the mystery to which we are forbidden to give a meaning, lest we utter naïve or scientific absurdities; mystery that has no meaning but that must not be confused with the “non-sense” that madmen who are trying hard to be funny find so gratifying.

The image of a locomotive is immediately familiar; its mystery is not perceived.

In order for its mystery to be evoked, another immediately familiar image without mystery – the image of a dining room fireplace – was joined with the image of the locomotive (thus I did not join a familiar image with a so-called mysterious image such as a Martian, an angel, a dragon, or some other creature erroneously thought of as “mysterious.” In fact, there are neither mysterious nor unmysterious creatures. The power of thought is demonstrated by unveiling or evoking the mystery in creatures that seem familiar to use [out of error or habit])....

....The word idea is not the most precise designation for what I thought when I united a locomotive and fireplace. I didn't have an idea; I only thought of an

image.... After the image has been painted, we can think of the relation it may bear to ideas or words. This is not improper, since images, ideas, and words are different interpretations of the same thing: thought.

However, in order to state what is truly necessary about an image, one must refer exclusively to that image...

-Rene Magritte¹⁵



fig. 34

The umbrella that I made in the computer did not really speak about the umbrella as it truly was. It was just a model of an umbrella at first. I played around with it, changed the lighting and the texture of each material, and moved it around to change its angle; the beauty of using a computer was that, unlike making an actual object, the image could be easily modified and reexamined. Then I made an illustration of a floating umbrella which cast a shadow on a floor. This image had an undefinable quality which became the core of my investigations.

The perfect balance suggested by a floating object fascinates me. In the physical world, an object is substantial and has its own weight. An object is influenced by gravity, therefore it sits on something and does not usually float by itself. The floating umbrella was something that could not happen in a normal situation; however, I wanted to make it even more extreme. Finally, I removed the

cloth from the umbrella, exposing its ribs, but left the shadow of the original umbrella intact. Less did become more, and this image became the prototype for one of my thesis installations.

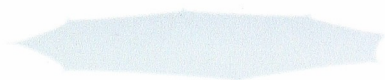
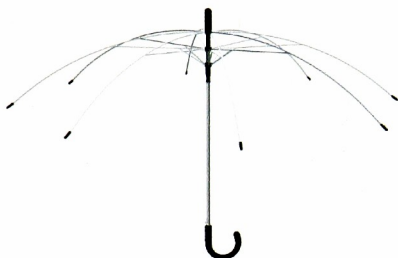


fig. 35

I printed out the illustration on photographic paper, and realized that I had made a photograph without capturing an actual object with a camera. As I wrote earlier, I had a problem with the fact that a photograph is assumed to be a representation of something. However, with this “photograph,” viewers did not question reality; because the object seemed to be clearly there, and assumed the umbrella

must have existed. The umbrella in the photograph was recognized as an umbrella just because it looked like an umbrella. This umbrella did not actually exist but as soon as it became what seemed to be a photograph, the unreal became real.

Meanwhile, I was trying to make black photographs. I started to make the black photographs as an extension of the white photographs whose seeming emptiness challenged the viewers’ experience. This was not a repetition of the earlier work, rather the black photographs gave me a new opportunity to explore aspects of perception, different from those of the white photographs.

The process was simple. I photographed something black to make a black photograph. However, when I looked at the photograph, I felt that something was missing even though the resulting photograph was definitely what I had intended. Although the photographs had a slight hint of linear imagery, a sense of depth was missing.

I know what I did with my white photographs. I presented those as brightness of light instead of the color of white. The condition of that it's so bright that you don't see was captured in the photographs. And I shouldn't try to make black photographs now. Instead, I should make dark photographs. So dark that you almost see nothing. See something hidden in darkness and your imagination will come to play.

February 5th, 2000

To me, there is a difference between black and dark. If something is black, it implies that it is black in color and calls the surface of the object to question. On the other hand, if something is dark, it implies a lack of light, therefore the object is hidden in a poorly illuminated space. The question became one about photography. After something is photographed, it loses its three dimensional form, and the original object is dismissed, thus the issue of surface or space is irrelevant.

When I was working on this project, I tried to experience what it was like to be in total darkness. I closed my eyes and spent time in my apartment. At the beginning, I tried to use my visual memory to replace my vision. However, it did not work as I thought and I realized how unreliable my visual memory was. I thought I was observing the things in my apartment everyday but I was not. The longer I closed my eyes the more I started to perceive my surroundings through my other senses.

After this experiment, I knew that I needed to make a dark space instead of dark photographs. Photography cannot escape its two dimensionality. Viewing

implies being in front of something. Instead, the experience of entering a physical space of darkness was more critical than a two dimensional presentation of dark which would be viewed in a well lit gallery.

BETWEEN / INSTALLATION

There were three pieces in my thesis show, *THE LINE*, *THE BULB* and *THE UMBRELLA*. The core of each piece is a manifestation of the concept of between, which became the title of my thesis show, and which will be discussed in detail in a later section.

The relationships of the individual installations were enhanced by the lay out of the rooms in the gallery. As viewers enter the first piece, *THE LINE*, their vision started to adjust to the limited amount of light. The space of *THE LINE* was to prepare the viewers to enter the next piece, *THE BULB*. In this very dim space, vision adapted completely to the darkness. The darkness of *THE BULB* space and the blackness of the

hallway after *THE BULB* intensified the whiteness and the brightness of the last piece, *THE UMBRELLA*.

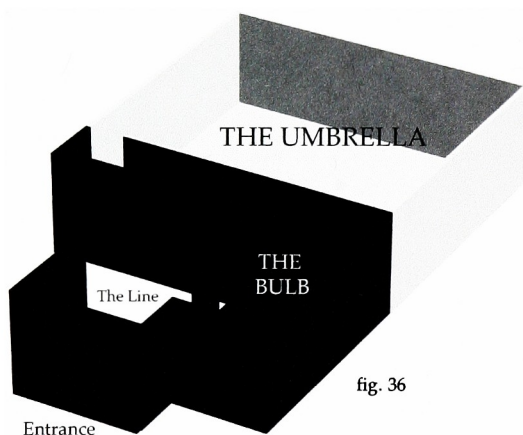


fig. 36

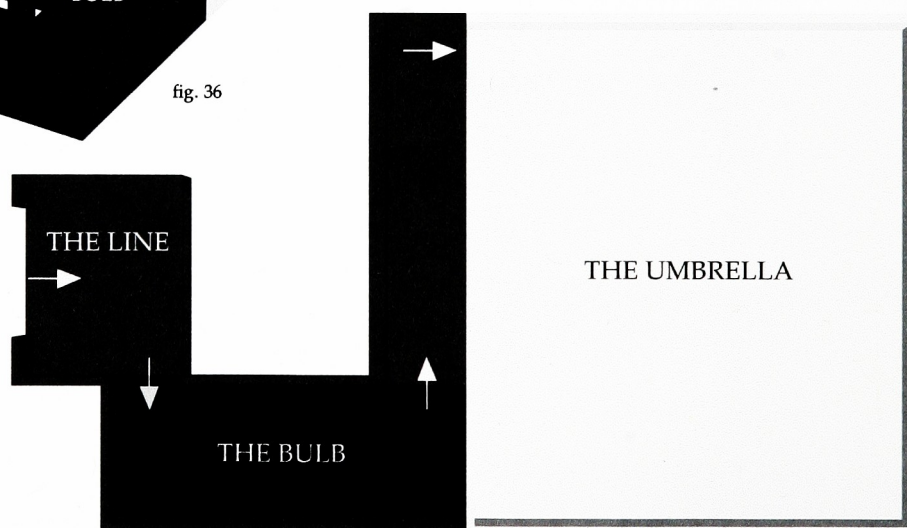


fig. 37

THE LINE

As the viewers walked in the entrance, they confronted a window like screen, approximately 40" x 65". A glow of light came from white fabric illuminated from behind. Projected onto the fabric was a thin horizontal line, approximately 1/16 of an inch wide, which subtly but constantly moved. It could be interpreted for what it appeared to be, a line or a string dancing, but for some it became the horizon, a landscape or a waterline as it connected with memories in one's brain.

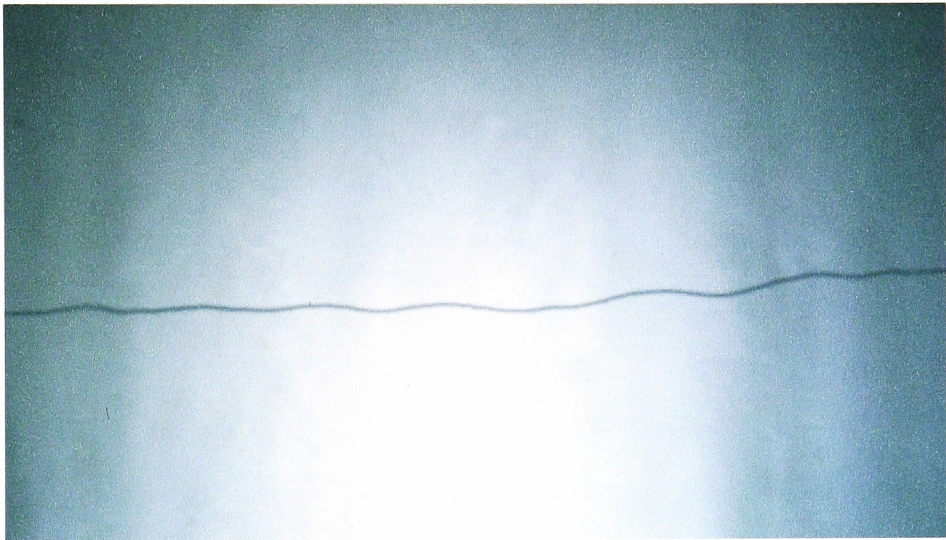


fig. 38

The line piece was an extension of the Wrinkled Fabric piece from the third quarter of the first year. After completing the Wrinkled Fabric piece, I was still intrigued with the possibilities of projection as an interesting medium. Projection basically adds an image layer onto whatever surface is used as the screen. This layer does not have its own three dimensional physicality. It can be seen and felt as we feel temperature but does not have its own form/shape. It can touch but cannot be touched so that I believe it is not physical. This aspect of being seen but not physical

intrigued me and I knew I would explore more of the possibilities of projection as a medium. My first experiments were with materials such as fabrics, water, the mirror and smoke, etc., none of which were satisfactory. One day when I was experimenting with a projector, it failed to work. I was almost ready to give up the idea of using a projector. I took a slide out and saw what was in front of me. There on the loosely hung fabric I was using for a screen was the sharp shadow of the thin string I had stretched as a level. As the fabric moved, the shadow looked like it was dancing. After a few adjustments, I had completed the first piece, *THE LINE*.

THE LINE presented the shadow of what was behind the screen. *Shadow*, defined by OED¹⁶, is "a tract of partial darkness produced by a body intercepting the direct rays of the sun or other luminary." A shadow indicates the presence of what is casting the shadow. In *THE LINE*, a viewer could not see what was casting the shadow, and the shadow became literal presence.

I was attracted by the qualities which mimicked my earlier photographs. This piece had the simplicity, minimalism and abstractness of my abstract photographs. The important differences were the movement and the three dimensionality of the image. I began to understand that the line piece was not an abstraction of something. Just because an image is not recognizable, it does not mean that it can be categorized in abstract art. As a matter of fact, I did not abstract anything in *THE LINE* piece despite the fact that it looked abstract. Unlike my abstract photographs, *THE LINE* was literally there and was not a function of reducing an object to be abstracted from.

THE BULB

To the right of *THE LINE* was a curtain which marked the entrance to my second installation, *THE BULB*. This space was dark so that the only thing the viewers saw was a light bulb on a wall as they first walked into the room. As the viewers approached the image of the light bulb, they recognized that it was a reflection in a mirror and the original was mounted on the wall facing the mirror. Over the course of three minutes *THE BULB* began to glow and then faded away, changing the levels of illumination in the room. It was so slow that unless viewers stayed long enough, they would not realize that *THE BULB* was actually changing and not a still image. Upon close examination, the viewer would also realize that there was something strange about the light bulb; was it a document of a light bulb or something else? As *THE BULB* slowly lit up, the dark space as well as viewers' perception of the space became more defined. The longer the viewers stayed in the room the more they started to see but *THE BULB* never fully lit up and soon went back into darkness. The viewers thought they saw things but were never sure.

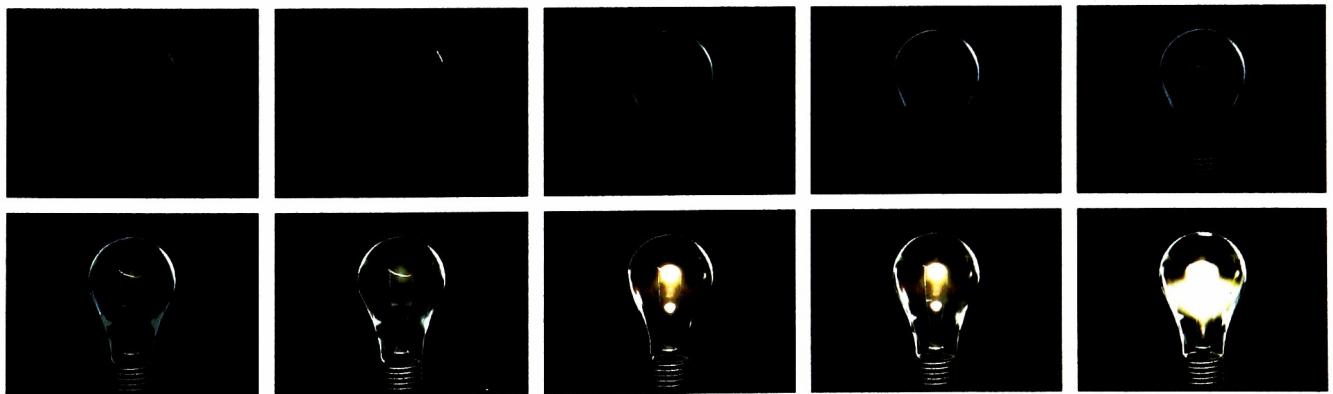


fig. 39

THE BULB was an extension of my dark photographs. After deciding to make a dark space instead of dark photographs, I started to wonder what would make a space dark. It sounds obvious that no light would make a space dark. However, if there were no light in this world, then the concept of darkness would not exist either. It is light that makes one aware of darkness. The light bulb imagery was fabricated to emphasize darkness in the space and vice versa.

The image of the light bulb was created digitally rather than photographing or videotaping an actual light bulb. As I wrote in the section titled, Second Year / Pre-thesis, I became interested in the idea of computer generated objects and images as I worked on making 3D digital models. What interests me the most about them is the ability to mimic reality. From the invention of photography, or even the invention of the Renaissance system of perspective, humans have tried to recreate reality. The Renaissance perspective was used as a way of mimicking reality and photography is used to capture reality. Now in the digital age, humans have started to create reality.

One day when I was making *THE BULB*, a new question arose; was I simulating the "reality" of a light bulb, or making something totally new that looked like a light bulb? What was the difference between my bulb and a "real" light bulb? In the actual production of *THE BULB*, I mimicked the form of a 60-watt clear light bulb and closely examined how an actual light bulb would slowly light up. *THE BULB* did not light up the way a "real" one does, rather I transformed a crescent moon into a light bulb. *THE BULB* "looked real" enough, but did not exist in the real world as an object, yet, it was real since it could be seen and perceived even though it only existed as the ones and zeros of a digital file. *THE BULB* was in fact not a simulation of a "real" light bulb. Yet, one could only know what was seen by naming *THE BULB* a light bulb and responding to it as if it were.

THE UMBRELLA

As the viewers passed through a curtain to the right of *THE BULB*, they entered the black hall way. After the experience of blackness, the brilliance of the white space that the viewers were entering was intensified. In this white room was the skeleton of the umbrella apparently levitating and casting a shadow of what was not there.



fig. 40

This umbrella evolved from the computer-generated model I made in Formz. After finishing the digital model, I printed it out on photographic paper. Looking at the photograph, I began to think that it would be interesting if it was an installation instead of a two dimensional representation. There were not enough illusionary, mysterious qualities that I was looking for in the photograph because the digital manipulation is in common use. Instead, a three dimensional representation would create an illusion by presenting the actual. The saying "seeing is believing" indicates people tend to believe in something only when they see it in real life. I knew the only way to present the illusion was through an installation which would call perception and knowledge into question.

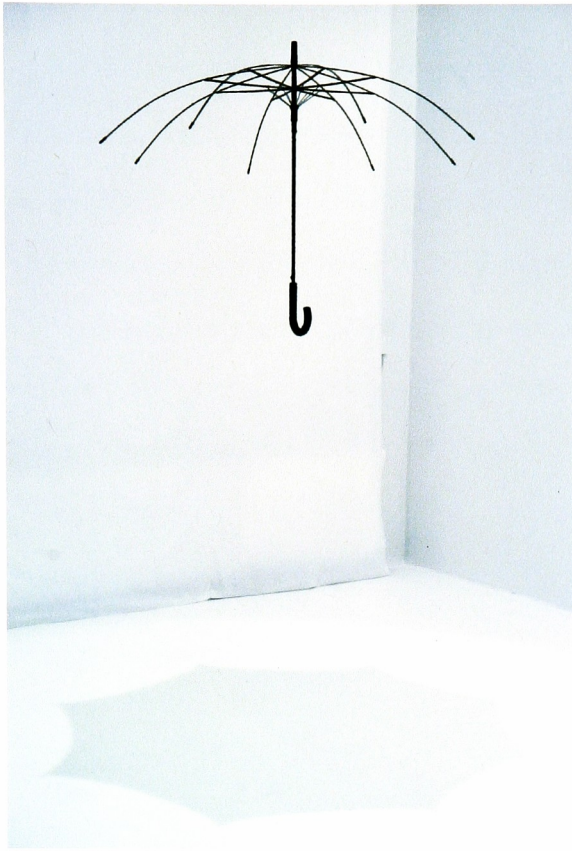


fig. 41

First of all, in order to make the skeleton of the umbrella, I altered an umbrella by removing the fabric and curving each rib so that it looked as if it was covered in an invisible fabric. Figuring out how to make the shadow was interesting. I tried many ways to make the shadow; yet, only one worked. By using a mirror and a projector, I was able to create a shadow on the floor. The umbrella and the shadow were placed in the white room so

that two objects related each other and created the illusion.

At the show, most viewers tried to figure out the illusion between the shadow and the umbrella. The viewers were cognizant of the umbrella as an umbrella without fabric floating in air and the shadow as a shadow of the shape of an umbrella cast by the skeleton of the umbrella. However, since the relationship between the two conceived objects did not fit exactly with the viewers' "pre-conceived(perceived)" notion as to what should exist, the question arose to the viewers; what is it that I am seeing?"

BETWEEN

Between, *prep.* *Of simple position:* The proper word expressing the local relation of a point to two other points in opposite directions from it (i.e. if a point has two other points on opposite sides of it, it is said to be between them): In the space which separates two points; in the direct line which joins two points; hence, in any line of communication which passes from one point, place, or object, to another. *Of time:* in the interval following one event or point of time and preceding another.

- OED¹⁷

My thesis started with my question of what one really sees. Seeing can be represented by a schema. However, seeing becomes possible when visual information through eye's retina reaches the brain. Seeing always involves interpretations of what is in front of a viewer as John Berger states "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe¹⁸." In other words, one *assumes* that the world exists the way it is perceived. For example, when there is a sound of drip-drip, one would assume that a faucet was turned off loosely. When there is a front side, a top side and a left side of a house, then one would assume that there should be a back side, a bottom side and a right side of the house as well without actually seeing them. Putting it in extreme, the world exists based on our assumptions. Yet, sometimes there is a gap between a perceived reality and conceived reality. In this situation, a question about what is seen arises. As experienced in *THE UMBRELLA*, I want to continue to pose the questions about seeing.

There are many literal "betweens" that viewers could find in my thesis show: light and shadow, black and white, on and off, ceiling and floor, the umbrella and the shadow and so on. However, I used the term for the title of my thesis show to define one's perception of space and/or time. Any given space or time exists by itself without being perceived or conceived. For instance, if there were eternal emptiness,

one would recognize it as only the void. However, as soon as there is a point A in the void, then the void, for the first time, is realized as a space. More specifically, because of the notion of the distance between point A and the viewer, the space becomes defined. Also, as soon as the space is defined, specific meanings are formed by the one who defines it. The same thing is true for time as well. Without point A, what lies between cannot be recognized therefore it seems not existent. Illusion, in my thesis, plays the roll of a point A, so that the void that is perceived becomes something that the viewer is conscious of.

There is, also, another sense that "between" lies in my work. In *THE UMBRELLA*, as I stated earlier in this section, a viewer would question that what it was that was seen. This happens because the viewer encounters the gap between what is perceived and what was already conceived as a known fact. As a result, the viewers would go through the process of reduction: questioning themselves about what is happening and trying to figure out why this was happening. Having the answer for "how to" is not as critical as asking the question "what is it that I am seeing?" "What is it that I am seeing?" becomes a key point to recognize and re-understand what was once conceived. The process of recognition and re-understanding is what lies between.

CONCLUSION

How we perceive can be questioned, yet we cannot undo the fact that we perceive. Perception itself is always definite.

Very often one's vision is directly connected to the evidence of one's existence. One believes the presence of what is visually perceived. It is through perception that one would distinguish and identify the self.

To question one's seeing is to question one's existence.

MORNING SONG SUNG BY A CLOWN

I suspect that it exists; that it really *is* something.

No one has ever stated its contours but I think they *are* clear. I don't think it'll stay in the same position forever, but *right now* I think it's reflecting a little light, even casting a shadow. It can't not be, and somehow it is like something.

But if it's something, it cannot, I *think*, be thought unimportant even if no one uses it. For some reason I feel as though I want it to be something. I wonder whether it's impossible for it not to be something. If it's not something, what in the world can it be? It can be that there isn't anything except something, can't it?

Since it's not at all indistinct, it's something after all, *isn't it?* If it's something, don't we think that it should be something about which we can't ask what it is? Something which we can't answer is nothing? Some something which is not *some* thing?

Because it's too easy, for instance, to say shellfish or rope or dizziness, I pray that it be something to the degree that it's nothing other than something. Just lying there or floating.

(I honestly wish the world would begin there – I don't think I'd mind if it ended.)

– Shuntaro Tanikawa¹⁹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Holmes, Oliver Wendell. *Sun-Painting and Sun Sculpture*. Atlantic Monthly, vol. 8 (1861), pp.13-29
- ² Szarkowski, John. *Mirrors and windows : American photography since 1960*. New York : Museum of Modern Art ; Boston : distributed by New York Graphic Society, c1978
- ³ Livingstone, Marco. *The Essential DUANE MICHALS*. Bulfinch Press ,1997. pp. 55-57
- ⁴ Ibid, *The Essential...* pp. 82-85
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